

# 9 Improving interactions between teachers and students in virtual exchanges – a case of mentor/learner relationships in MOOCs

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## Abstract

Shanghai International Studies University has hosted an intercultural Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) course for several years. Course facilitators, mentors, and learners from all over the world are invited to enroll in the class. However, conversations between mentors and learners revealed that most were superficial. Thus, a pilot study was undertaken to improve mentor and learner interactions undertaken. The main focus of the research was to analyze the content of nine sustained conversations in the MOOC. The threads were selected for analysis from the first, third, and final week of the intercultural course. Initial analysis indicated responses made within the same day, and even within the early hours of initial postings, were conducive to sustained conversations. Within the discussion section, several suggestions were given to improve online interactions between mentors and learners. Training and orientation of mentors were suggested. Mentors could be encouraged to use the MOOC's notification system to reply to the learner's comments. With appropriate training, mentors might be able to respond to the learner's comments effectively. In the end, future suggestions for research were given to assess further and improve MOOCs.

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## **1. Background**

### **1.1. Introduction to and evolution of online learning**

Blackboard, a pioneering online learning platform released in 1997, brought innovations to education (Cole et al., 2017). Historically, instructors used it or other learning management systems to complement traditional in-class lectures (Balula & Moreira, 2014). Sustained interaction between instructors and learners is missing in most online learning platforms. The lack of synchronous communication is also lacking in most MOOCs.

Universities' use of MOOCs has further changed the teaching profession. Instructors can open courses literally to a worldwide audience. MOOCs, however, can have a double personality (e.g. Littlejohn & Hood, 2018). On the one hand, they provide excellent opportunities for intercultural, even global, communication and engagement in virtual learning environments. On the other hand, MOOCs may serve as just another form of social media such as Facebook, WeChat, or LinkedIn. They can claim to attract large enrollments of learners, deliver content to many nations, and provide statistics on numbers of chat comments. But, unless facilitators and mentors are actively engaged, learners may miss out on both perceived and real learning benefits. Intercultural theory – and evidence from an intercultural MOOC – might help assess this issue of what is the role of the mentor in a mentor-learner relationship, and how can interactions and facilitating learning online be improved? This paper provides an analysis of such a case.

### **1.2. Communication accommodation theory**

One of the most widely used intercultural theories has been the transformation of what was first called speech accommodation theory to Communication

Accommodation Theory (CAT) (e.g. Giles, 2016; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987; Zhang, Imamura, & Weng, 2017). Initially, CAT was used to analyze interactions between law enforcement and civilians as well as medical workers and patients (Giles, 2016; Giles et al., 1987). Scholars investigated elements such as word usage and pronunciation between dyads and how those influenced the outcomes of interpersonal interactions. In the case of police officers' and civilians' encounters, conversational patterns were examined to see what led to the use of force, when it happened, and why. Regarding patients and medical workers, exchanges were analyzed to assess the discussion of the treatment of diseases as well as patient satisfaction (Giles, 2016). From these studies, practices and outcomes related to invoking closeness or distance were noted.

Convergence and divergence are the two main tenets of CAT (see Zhang et al., 2017, p. 173). Dyads that seek to close social distance may use inclusive language or questions accompanied with attentive listening skills. Interlocutors who seek to maintain or expand social distance might use rebukes, sarcasm, ridicule, or other disparaging remarks. Within these two dimensions, there are several subcomponents that include accommodation, over accommodation, under accommodation, or no accommodation.

At present, CAT, along with its main tenets and subcomponents, continues to evolve beyond analyzing interlocutors' pronunciation and word usage. An example comes from the first author's dissertation project (Draeger, 2017) that examined foreign experts' teaching beliefs regarding Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and classroom interactions. In that project, CAT was used to analyze how instructors introduced and carried out learning activities during class time. The author specifically assessed whether teachers' classroom interactions supported students' development of ICC. The results indicated that teachers who engaged in creating and delivering learning activities both supported and enhanced students' development of ICC. As a follow up to that study in a different domain, this case study examines the following research question: what is the status of mentor and learner interactions in MOOC courses?

## **2. Case study**

### **2.1. Participants**

Data collection consisted of retrieving transcripts of conversational threads from an intercultural MOOC course. The class in question has been open to a global audience two times during each academic year since 2015. The fall run is generally from October to November and the spring run begins in March and concludes in April. At the time of writing, transcripts from the fall run of 2019 were available and used for this case study.

The intercultural MOOC run number nine was sponsored by a research university in Shanghai. Faculty, or course leaders, are responsible for creating course content and recruitment of mentors. Postgraduate students and faculty of the research university serve as facilitators, or mentors; both designations are used to reduce redundancy within the report.

### **2.2. Context for study**

People are living more-and-more online in the 21st Century and many are engaging in online learning portals. The challenge though, for instructors and learners in such online courses, is to avoid being inundated with the noise that permeates much of the Internet. The noise of the Internet contains the images and sounds that bombard the average user. Individuals involved with MOOCs who are distracted by the ‘noise’ of the Internet may lose out on opportunities for learning. In order to improve future runs of the intercultural MOOC, this case study was conducted. The goal of this case study is to analyze a sample of prolonged conversations between facilitators and learners within the selected intercultural MOOC.

Individuals can now access the Internet from a myriad of devices such as laptop computers or smartphones. Most application developers create programs that can be used across most devices. With the touch of a button or swipe of a screen,

Internet users can easily get diverted to some other online offering. In the case of MOOCs, gains from learning can be lost or diluted due to the abundance of information that is available on other sites.

In the case of MOOC participants, courses are also now accessed by a variety of devices. This means that mentors must also deal with challenges inherent in using the Internet. It is then incumbent that instructors' comments be analyzed to determine if their comments encourage and help keep the focus of the learner or seem unengaged and thus distract or hinder intercultural learning within the enrolled MOOC community. Another factor studied is the participant to facilitator ratio; obviously, mentor numbers are outweighed by participants but what is an ideal ratio? If a reasonable ratio is not attained, it could mean that facilitators who even regularly log in to the course may be inundated by comments and not know where to begin.

In a traditional classroom setting, interactions are usually synchronous. Questions are asked and answered in real-time. Likewise, elements of immediacy and class time management are present and influence teacher and student exchanges. In such cases, pressures of class time can negatively influence an instructor's responses with learners and vice versa. When class is concluded, learners' needs for learning new content or clearing up misunderstandings may not have been met. This has implications for the teacher and student relationship as well as the learner's perceived benefit and view of the class in question.

### **2.3. Data collection and analysis**

The intercultural MOOC selected for this study ran for five weeks and was offered in the autumn semesters. Each week contains an overall theme and several sub-themes. The module for Week 1 was 'comprehending intercultural communication'; Week 2 is 'contextualizing cultural identities'; Week 3 was 'comparing cultural communication styles'; Week 4 is 'clarifying and contrasting values'; and Week 5 was 'cultivating intercultural adaptation'. The analysis for this study was comprised of three subsequent steps.

The first was the selection of Weeks 1, 3, and 5 for analysis due to beginning, mid, and final sample potential. The second was the selection of conversations where both learners and mentors were involved. The third step was to employ a mixed-method design, on a small scale, to analyze interactions within the MOOC. Quantitatively, time stamps were used to assess the timeliness (promptness) of comments and responses. Qualitatively, the words and ideas expressed were coded and analyzed using CAT for guidance.

### **2.4. Protection of identities**

The primary approach to data collection was convenience sampling within the course. The second author, as a course facilitator, granted permission to the first author, to download discussions from the autumn semester run of the intercultural MOOC (ninth run historically). The next step taken to protect the identities of both facilitators and learners was to remove their online identity and replace them with ‘learner’ and ‘mentor’ or ‘facilitator’ designations.

### **2.5. Data analysis**

This section provides case examples from the sample collected. After the presentation of virtual interactions conducted online, analysis will follow. Mentor and learner comments are kept as they were posted for authenticity (grammar, punctuation, or vocabulary errors are not corrected).

#### **2.5.1. Conversation #1**

“hello, I am from Italy, I a lot to study cultural and social anthropology and languages. I am always been interested at these matters. I think that intercultural communication can be part of the holistic studies of anthropology because I think goes to study cultures but in a globalized way” (Learner, 19 October).

“Hi \_\_\_\_\_, welcome here! You have very intuitive hunch and major studies in the IC field did begin from anthropology, notably Edward T.

Hall and his study of non-verbal communication. We look forward to more of your insights!” (Mentor, 19 October).

“thank you” (Learner, 19 October).

This was an exchange based upon intercultural theory, e.g. Edward T. Hall’s contributions. The learner shared a bit of her background and awareness in mentioning an academic relationship between intercultural communication and anthropology. The mentor commended the learner for being intuitive while mentioning Hall’s name in her reply to add some content to the discussion.

This would be an example of accommodation in several ways. The reply by the facilitator mentioned extremely specific items in the initial comment. Then the instructor referenced a connection between anthropology and intercultural communication. The final is an invitation to the learner to contribute more of her thoughts to the course.

#### 2.5.2. *Conversation #2*

“افات في العالم كثيرة ومتعددة ومن المهم التواصل والتعارف بين الثقافات”  
(Learner, 19 October)

“Hi \_\_\_\_! Though I don’t have the literacy to read your language, I know you are saying about the importance of knowing and communicating with other culture. I think express our own identity is important for this learning platform, and your language would make us more diverse and bring some new perspectives. But if you feel doing so, sharing your ideas in English would help more people to understand you and interact with you!” (Mentor, 19 October).

The learner shared a greeting in Arabic. The instructor freely admitted a lack of knowledge concerning the language used, which maintained social distance. However, the learner was greeted by name (username posted with their initial comment) and commended them for contributing a new perspective to

intercultural communication but also asked if they might use English. This would be an example of accommodation in that new ideas were acknowledged, and a gentle encouragement was made to use the common language of the course.

The mentor was quick to respond on the same day as the initial comment. She also mentions how cultural identities could enrich discussions within the MOOC. The final component of the interaction is an encouragement to the learner to leverage both linguistic and cultural identities so more people could join in the conversations.

### 2.5.3. *Conversation #3*

“Hola! Namasty sabhi ko.i am here to make myself strong in speaking skills.i am very weak in communication orally.and for my dream jobs it is must to communicate and mix up with your coworkers easily and effectively as they can be from different regions.so, i want to make myself more interactive because i am not even expressive with my best friend.so, i just want to improve this and prepare for my dream and want to live that dream. Tips are welcome if any to improve my oral speaking,specially in English. Happy to be here. Thankyou” (Learner, 19 October).

“Thank you for your sharing about yourself and welcome to the course! It resonates with me and many Chinese students also feel frustrated with their spoken English in part because of their personality. However, I believe that having the willingness to communicate is a good start, right?” (Mentor, 19 October).

“Yes, thanks” (Learner, 19 October).

The learner mentioned personal linguistic weaknesses and hopes for the course. Specifically, the learner hoped to improve and strengthen general communication skills and to make friends in this course. The facilitator welcomed the learner



to the course and established a connection by sharing her own observations of struggles with oral English. The instructor continued her idea in an inclusive way, by including her Chinese classmates. The facilitator commented on the same day as well and concluded with a question to the learner's greeting. Perhaps this is why the learner replied, a couple of days later.

Questions are excellent means of continuing virtual discussions. The content of the response is also rich with inclusive language, especially with the use of 'believe'. The use of 'believe' or 'feel' or 'think' could be used to invite others to virtual conversations. When used effectively, as above, many learners might respond to them.

#### 2.5.4. *Conversation #4*

"I have quite an intercultural background but recently I feel I don't really know much about other cultures. I grew up in the US because my mother started working there after she finished her masters, and I met lots of people from Mexico, Spain, Philippines, Japan... I also went to the UK as an exchange student. I have a pen pal in Australia, my sister lives in Italy, and I also have other relatives living all over the world. But recently I met an international exchange student from Turkey, and I found out that I knew nothing about his language or culture. And so, when he told me his language was 'agglutination language' so that it was hard for him to study Chinese, I couldn't really understand him, and I felt so sorry for that. So, I really hope to learn more about other cultures, and most importantly, learn about how to communicate when you meet someone from a culture that you know nothing about. Look forward to the next few weeks of learning!" (Learner 1, 15 October).

"Hi \_\_\_\_! So nice to meet you here! I think your intercultural background will help you better understand this course! And I am sure you can learn something about how to deal with people from a culture you never know" (Mentor, 15 October).

“Hello, \_\_\_\_! I really admire your experiences of different cultures. And I think you have more opportunities than average people to approach various cultures in the world, and it will be amazing to learn something about them from people of those cultures” (Learner 2, 15 October).

“@\_\_\_\_ Yes! I have lots of opportunities to learn about different cultures from people with totally different backgrounds around me, and I feel so lucky about it. Making friends with them allows me to know some differences that we thought would have been the same among different cultures, which actually turned out to be different, and that was something really interesting. But it’s strange that every time I meet someone from a new culture, I assume that they would share lots of similarities with countries nearby, even when I know how many differences there are between Chinese and Japanese culture!” (Learner 1, 15 october).

This is a detailed exchange for several reasons. The original Learner 1 talked in-depth about their personal and professional life. Specifically, the learner mentioned his sojourns throughout the world. The learner talked about previous discussions and then ended his comment with hopes for the course.

The comment made by the mentor was brief. The welcome was forthcoming and warm. However, the facilitator’s comments on the background of the speaker established no personal or professional connection, compared with previous comments. The comment concluded with a thought concerning one of the course goals, interacting with culturally heterogeneous people (but could be construed as impersonal). What is enlightening is that the quote was made on the same day. What is fascinating about this thread is that an in-depth reply was made by another learner (Learner 2) to the original post. Also, the use of the @ symbol, which is seen in subsequent threads, might be indicative of convergence in virtual conversation (Learner 2 specifically references Learner 1). This is a type of dialogue which could enhance learning in the MOOC as it conveys interpersonal convergence.

### 2.5.5. *Conversation #5*

“After finishing the test, a question come to my mind: How can we start a conversation with people from different cultural backgrounds without making them embarrassed or feel offended? Sometimes we often get misunderstood by using improper words. For example, ‘have a word with sb’ is totally different from ‘have words with sb’. It will be rather embarrassing if we use them wrongly. Moreover, we may also make mistakes in using some gestures that have different meanings in different cultures. So, I am eager to know how we can do better to get on well with people from different cultural backgrounds. Yes. Sometimes we may run into a confusion when having an intercultural communication. What we should do is to learn more about different cultures and values so as to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding” (Learner A, 14 October).

“@\_\_\_\_\_ I very much agree with you! As someone born and raised in the Chinese culture, even I could sometimes find it hard to read other Chinese people’s mind because of differences in our background. Where I come from, a considerable proportion of the population are Hui and Tibetan, and because of decades of inter-ethnic influence, the way I look often makes people mistake me as an ethnic minority – in fact I am Han Chinese. You are right about non-verbal communication – people’s outlook, dialect, and body language sometimes communicate more about what others think who they are, but not necessarily who they truly are. This is also why knowledge of intercultural communication is necessary for us to know each other better. : )” (Mentor, 14 October).

The exchange by the learner and mentor is interesting on several levels. The learner largely described hypothetical interactions but made no mention of personal experience. However, the learner used inclusive language in the post (e.g. the use of ‘we’). The quote ended with some great ideas suggesting that learning about other cultures could reduce misunderstandings.

The facilitator replies with, “I very much agree with you” which may not be conducive to prolonged conversation in a MOOC course. It is interesting to note that “agree with you...” was seen quite a bit in the following threads. The mentor shared personal background while interacting with the learner. Specifically, she references difficulties in relating to individuals in her own culture. She mentioned that ethnic minorities live in her hometown and that physiologically, she blends in with them but admits that she is Han Chinese. This would be a good example of convergence in that the mentor is using personal experiences to compliment the learner’s initial comments. Also, this exchange took place on the same day.

“@\_\_\_\_\_ [to Learner A above] If I want to start a conversation with foreigners just for chatting with them, I would firstly use the most common greeting words: hi/hello with a big sweet smile to show my friendliness. And then, through his/her reaction to detect whether it is appropriate to start a casual conversation. If it is necessary to inquire them, ‘Excuse me?’ is quite ok. As for gestures, it is quite complex as different countries have their own set of gestures with different meanings. I do appreciate if this course could have a complete summary of gestures in different countries” (Learner B, 14 October).

This illustrates a great exchange on the same thread. The original comment by Learner A expressed a general sentiment at first. The mentor expanded those ideas through sharing personal experiences. This second Learner B offered some practical advice as this thread was continued. Overall, sustained interactions such as these tend to facilitate engagement and intercultural learning in a MOOC class. The above remark also began with the use of @ and the initial speaker’s name. The remark was also made on the same day of the initial thread. Exchanges between multiple individuals are remarkable in that they can provide both personal anecdotes and even practical advice.

### 2.5.6. Conversation #6

“I think each one of us is the intersection point of several cultural sets

creating our own ‘set’, now the objective is to know how to adapt to all those different sets pr packages we will encounter in life, and help others how to do it” (Learner A, 15 October).

“@\_\_\_\_\_ Good point about our own cultural ‘set’! In IC we’d see this set as a box of identities a person holds. Sometimes these identities were very much determined even before we were born, sometimes they are very situational. Learning what identities you want to bring out and how is an on-going process of shaping intercultural communication. Good to see you here too” (Mentor, 15 October).

“@\_\_\_\_\_ I quite agree with you that our own cultural set is created based on several cultural sets from our family, our schools, the society and many other groups at different levels that we belong to. And sometimes we may not realize how those cultural sets have influenced us. So, I’d like to learn more about how I have become I, and what I might be in the future, influenced by the various cultural sets around me” (Learner B, 15 October).

“I cannot agree with you more. The culture one lives in exerts an invisible influence on one’s character, value, and baheviour, etc. On the other hand, one’s character and behavior can reveal his or her culture. For example, I am a Hui girl, and my culture has decided that I can not eat pork, and people who know I do not eat pork will naturally think of I am a Hui” (Learner C, 15 October).

Initially, Learner A remarked how overlapping cultural personalities could influence interactions. The mentor concurs and then expounds on it by briefly mentioning intercultural theory. However, the instructor does not introduce any specific theory by name. So, this response might be an example of under accommodation due to that fact. However, Learner B described hypothetical variables which may impact the cultural heritage which people ascribe to. The final comment by Learner C expressed an exact idea concerning Hui identity and the consumption of pork, which is prohibited to practitioners of Islam.

Within this conversation thread is an acknowledgment of culture's influence on societies and people. Learners and facilitators are sharing multiple ideas about culture as well. Interculturally, this conversation is rich with examples and suggestions both personal and practical.

### 2.5.7. *Conversation #7*

“I grew up in a quite protected environment, not sharing much with people from different status. When I started working at the age of 20, I was surprised with people who had nothing to do with what I've always knew. It was quite shocking. Over the years, fortunately, this has changed, and I've met people from different countries, cultures, and background, both at home and abroad” (Learner B, 15 October).

“Insightful! Would be great if you could share one of your shocking experiences and how you overcame it so we can discuss further” (Mentor, 15 October).

“Thank you \_\_\_\_\_. I grew up in an environment where good manners were highly important and where you had to respect others and give them their space and be helpful in all you could. What I found was people being overfamiliar although they had just met you and knew nothing about you. I think they tried to be friendly, but I felt uncomfortable. They also made differences between new arrivals and people working in the company for many years. So, it was a contradiction. I learned that sometimes people, in work environments, see new colleagues as a threat” (Learner B, 18 October).

This is an example of a prolonged conversation. The learner revealed both personal and professional experiences. The facilitator encouraged the student to share some of those experiences with the MOOC audience. The student replied by sharing personal and professional experiences a couple days later. This could be an example of accommodation on two accounts. The first is that while brief,

the mentor invites the learner to share more. The second is that the student reciprocated and shared a few more thoughts, even though several days later (one feature of the course is that when anyone replies, an email is sent noting ‘you have received a reply in the course’ with an activity link for them to follow up on the comment).

The conversation was revealing on several accounts. The student compared and contrasted work and home cultures, which were in the same geographic region. However, there was not much follow up by the facilitator or other learners.

#### 2.5.8. *Conversation #8*

“1. Chinese culture is a typical high-context culture. 2. To those who we have good relationship with, we will be higher context, as we have formed our code through long relationship, which means we can easily understand each other without saying directly. But low context culture is when it comes to negotiation. In negotiation, every term, price, time, and other clauses need to be specified and can not be changed so that the contract is binding on both parties. 3. I think we should shift our communication style correspondently when the context changes between private context and public context” (Learner, 31 October).

“I totally agree with you! We need to choose our communication style according to the context we are in” (Mentor, 31 October).

The trend beginning in Week 3 is the brief and delayed responses from mentors. In this conversation thread and continuing, many replied, ‘totally agree with you’. To this end, many of the conversations were not sustained. The hosting website provided users with the option to ‘like’ comments. On the surface, the utterance, “agree with...” or liking a comment may express those emotions. The use of either is good, when backed up with substantial comments or thoughts. With the large number of learners commenting as the course grew, mentors may have been overwhelmed in keeping up and made shorter replies over time.

### 2.5.9. Conversation #9

“I’ve lived in six different countries and traveled to more than 60 so far” (Learner, 18 October).

“Hello, \_\_\_\_! Nice to meet you here, and your experiences are really fantastic. If possible, could you please share your adaptation experiences when you are in these countries? Many thanks!” (Mentor, 11 November).

“@\_\_\_\_ Your life experience is colorful, I think” (Learner 2, 11 November).

There were several examples of divergence in this thread. The learner disclosed how many countries he had been to. The mentor’s replies, while interesting, were quite delayed. Also, there does not seem to be any in-depth responses, either objective or subjective, to facilitate prolonged discussion. In previous examples, responses made quickly by the facilitators were likely to receive a response. Another reason for lack of interaction is the nature of the MOOC course as enrollees had access to a course for five weeks and comments and replies were increasingly spread out or spread thin. Either a larger mentor team is needed to sustain support for the course, or more time needs to be devoted to keep up the quality of replies in a timely fashion.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Overall summary of this case study

Mentors’ initial comments were present in large numbers in the first week and in the early part of the third week. During those times, replies to learners’ comments were made on the same day. The theme of Week 1 was comprehending intercultural communication. Students and mentors made introductory comments and extended warm greetings to one another. Self-introductions and greetings



made in the first week can be harnessed for conversations in later weeks. The theme of Week 3 was comparing cultural communication styles. Within the module of Week 3, people from North America, Asia, and other continents can share their perspectives and experiences of interpersonal conversational styles where they live. Regrettably, in Week 3, responses by mentors begin to fall off. Week 5's theme is cultivating intercultural adaptation. The content of Week 5 presents learners with an application to practice what they have learned regarding intercultural communication. However, mentors' responses to students' were far fewer in this module than in other modules. Mentors' replies were posted infrequently; some were a day or two delayed. In other cases, responses were posted a month late.

Considering the deficiencies, there are encouraging findings. When learners shared work or private experiences, mentors also shared their personal experiences. Regarding convergence, even intercultural convergence, this is valuable as it permits dyads to compare their respective experiences. When interactants discover similarities and differences, then intercultural learning can begin. Most of the modules included intercultural dimensions that provided students an opportunity to begin conversations. The key issue is how to continue conversations that allow learners and mentors to discover more about their respective cultures. An example would be Conversation 6, where course participants had a healthy discussion about dietary practices and taboos in Islamic culture. Another issue is how to promote in-depth discussions which last throughout the five-week course. The first step might be a modification of the recruitment and training of facilitators.

### **3.2. Rich intercultural communication**

Intercultural MOOCs present many benefits. Firstly, the MOOC which was analyzed was offered free of charge to interested individuals for seven weeks from time of enrollment (adequate time to finish the five weeks of content). Learners could view brief lectures, created by the course leaders, to learn about general intercultural theory and ideas. Students could also do so at a time convenient to them as well in any time zone worldwide (such that comments could appear

all over the 24-hour range). Essentially, course leaders and facilitators provided learners an opportunity for intercultural growth.

Learners shared personal, work, and cross-cultural experiences through virtual discussion in the course. The course in question is made available in China, the UK, the United States, and countries throughout the world (there were 2,709 enrollments from over 120 countries and regions in the run examined for this case study). To this end, facilitators, mentors, and learners could communicate internationally.

Considering opportunities for intercultural growth, a question needs to be asked: what is needed to promote and sustain deep online conversation? The best exchanges happened on the same day or relatively close time sequences. There are examples above between learners and facilitators that were occasionally joined in by other students in the same conversation threads; these present an opportunity for virtual convergence, so to speak (in the course, it is designated as social learning: 407 individuals engaged in these multiple learner threads throughout the course=20.7%). Only 72.6% of those who enrolled even started the course (1,967 ‘learners’, which is good for this run as some courses only get 40-50% of those who enroll to start a few steps), and of those only 49.4% engaged with portions of the content (972 ‘active learners’). In previous runs where mentor activity was notably high, those percentages were increased to 78-80% started and 55-75% active (getting 25-38% engaged in ‘social learning’).

### **3.3. Leveraging MOOC technological features**

One of the obstacles to intercultural learning and communication is the ‘noise’ of the Internet. The noise of the Internet contains the images and sounds that bombard the average user. Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, and others provide notifications in a variety of ways, but users may ignore them. This means that technological innovations are often needed to attract users’ attention.

The intercultural MOOC provides learners and mentors with directed notifications. Information provided in these prompts include the name of a

course participant who has replied to a specific comment. Mentors who quickly respond to notifications can stimulate continuous virtual interactions with and between learners. However, there are other technological features which may inhibit in-depth cross-cultural exchanges.

Mentors and learners may respond to a message with a 'like' by tapping on the available button. However, it seems that this option has the same effect that 'I agree' has. The overuse of 'like' or 'I agree' may hinder in-depth and critical discussion, which is also needed in virtual cross-cultural communication.

## **4. Pedagogical principles**

### **4.1. Recruitment and training of mentors**

Course leaders' traditional mentor recruitment involved posting invitations to social media group chats to graduate students (MAs and PhDs) who had been trained in the course contents (in this case, intercultural communication majors). Volunteers are then given the opportunity to serve as mentors, but there is minimal training. The primary training tool is a mentoring PowerPoint that compiles some key lessons and experiences from previous online course offerings.

Once the course begins, there is flexibility for both instructors and mentors as to how often they log in, though responsibility for each week is assigned to three to four mentors with encouragement to respond to as many learners as possible. But there are clearly variances in activity and response levels among mentors. Considering this problem, systematic training could be implemented, so mentors can successfully promote intercultural learning.

### **4.2. Method of training**

Course leaders could use offline meetings or Internet applications such as Zoom or Skype to recruit and train volunteers before the MOOC opens (Laverick, 2016). Initial meetings could be devoted to virtual team building

endeavors and providing advice to mentors. Veteran facilitators and course leaders could advise new volunteers on how to leverage available technology. Likewise, facilitators could share ideas on how to promote sustained virtual conversations in the MOOC. With the proper training, mentors can promote convergence in virtual conversation within MOOC. Firstly, facilitators can begin by thoughtfully responding to learners' comments as is seen above in the analysis section of this chapter. Secondly, learners who share a bit more of their background might encourage other learners and facilitators to join conversational threads (Conversation 6). Thirdly, when many mentors and learners join in on a virtual thread, there is a possibility for rich intercultural conversation.

## 5. Conclusion

As this case study has shown, employing principles from CAT, meaningful intercultural interactions can happen in MOOCs. As described above in the introduction, learners from all over the world enrolled in the intercultural MOOC. Convergence happened when people compared their life experiences as well as their cultural identities. Conversations 4 and 6, from the analysis section, are needed so intercultural MOOCs can flourish.

Covid-19 is altering the delivery of instruction all over the world. As a result, individuals are more actively enrolling in MOOCs for educational and social purposes. Because of this, the growing need for mindfulness in recruiting and training of mentors for MOOCs will increase. As course leaders and veterans provide more targeted guidance to novice mentors, the level and quality of engagement of online interaction can keep improving to help fulfill the unique role that MOOCs now play in the educational landscape.

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